A Pleasant Evening

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(Continued from last week.)

III.

"Have you ever drawn a picture of a corpse?" inquired Jamison next morning as I walked into his private room with a sketch of the proposed full page of the zoo.

"No, and I don't want to," I replied sullenly.

"Let me see your Central park page," said Jamison in his gentle voice, and I displayed it. It was about worthless as an artistic production, but it pleased Jamison, as I knew it would.

"Can you finish it by this afternoon?" he asked, looking up at me with persuasive eyes.

"Oh, I suppose so," I said wearily; "anything else, Mr. Jamison?"

"The corpse," he replied, "I want a sketch by tomorrow—finished."

"What corpse?" I demanded, controlling my indignation as I met Jamison's soft eyes.

There was a mute duel of glances. Jamison passed his hand across his forehead with a slight lifting of the eyebrows.

"I shall want it as soon as possible," he said in his caressing voice.

What I thought was, "Damned purring pussycat!" What I said was, "Where is this corpse?"

"In the morgue—have you read the morning papers? No? Ah—as you very rightly observe, you are too busy to read the morning papers. Young men must learn industry first, of course. What you are to do is this: the San Francsico police have sent out an alarm regarding the disappearance of a Miss Tufft—the millionaire's daughter, you know. Today a body was brought to the morgue here in New York, and it has been identified as the missing young lady—by a diamond ring. Now I am convinced that it isn't, and I'll show you why, Mr. Hilton."

He picked up a pen and made a sketch of a ring on a margin of that morning's Tribune.

"That is the description of her ring as sent on from San Francisco. You notice the diamond is set in the center of the ring where the two gold serpents' tails cross!

"Now the ring on the finger of the woman in the morgue is like this," and he rapidly sketched another ring where the diamond rested in the fangs of the two gold serpents.

"That is the difference," he said in his pleasant, even voice.

"Rings like that are not uncommon," said I, remembering that I had seen such a ring on the finger of the white-faced girl in the park the evening before. Then a sudden thought took shape—perhaps that was the girl whose body lay in the morgue!

"Well," said Jamison, looking up at me, "what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," I answered, but the whole scene was before my eyes, the vultures brooding among the rocks, the shabby black dress, and the pallid face—and the ring, glittering on that slim white hand!

"Nothing," I repeated, "when shall I go, Mr. Jamison? Do you want a portrait—or what?"

"Portrait—careful drawing of the ring, and—er—a center piece of the morgue at night. Might as well give people the horrors while we're about it."

"But," said I, "the policy of this paper—"

"Never mind, Mr. Hilton," purred Jamison, "I am able to direct the policy of this paper."

"I don't doubt your are," I said angrily.

"I am," he repeated, undisturbed and smiling; "you see this Tuffit case interests society. I am—er—also interested."

He held out to me a morning paper and pointed to a headline.

I read: "Miss Tuffit Dead! Her Fiance was Mr. Jamison, the well-known Editor."

"What!" I cried in horrified amazement. But Jamison had left the room, and I heard his chatting and laughing softly with some visitors in the press room outside.

I flung down the paper and walked out.

"The cold-blooded toad!" I exclaimed again and again—"making capital out of his fiancee's disappearance! Well, I—I'm d—nd! I knew he was a bloodless, heartless, grip-penny, but I never thought—I never imagined—" Words failed me.

Scarcely conscious of what I did I drew a Herald from my pocket and say the column entitled: "Miss Tuffit Found! Identified by Ring. Wild Grief of Mr. Jamison, her Fiance."

That was enough. I went out into the street and sat down in City Hall park. And, as I sat there, a terrible resolution came to me; I would draw that dead girl's face in such a way that it would chill Jamison's sluggish blood. I would crowd the black shadows of the morgue with forms and ghastly faces, and every face should bear something in it of Jamison. Oh, I'd rouse him from his cold, snaky apathy! I'd confront him with death in such an awful form that, passionless, base, inhuman as he was, he'd shrink from it as he would from a dagger thrust. Of couse, I'd lose my place, but that did not bother me, for I had decided to resign anyway, not having a taste for the society of human reptiles. And, as I sat there in the sunny park, furious, trying to plan a picture whose sombre horror should leave in his mind an ineffaceable scar, I suddenly thought of the pale black-robed girl in Central park. Could it be her poor, slender body that lay among the shadows of the grim morgue! If ever brooding despair was stamped on any face, I had seen its print on hers when she spoke to me in the park and gave me the letters. The letters! I had not thought of them since, but now I drew them from my pocket and looked at the addresses.

"Curious," I thought, "the letters are still damp; they smell of salt water, too."

I looked at the address again, written in the long fine hand of an educated woman who had been bred in a French convent. Both letters bore the same address, in French:

"CAPTAIN D'YNIOL.
(Kindness of a Stranger)"

"Captain d'Yniol," I repeated aloud—"confound it, I've heard that name! Now, where the deuce—where in the name of all that's queer—" Somebody who had sat down on the bench beside me placed a heavy hand on my shoulder.

It was the Frenchman, "Soger Charlie."

"You spoke my name," he said in apathetic tones.

"Your name!"

"Captain d'Yniol," he repeated; "it is my name."

I recognized him in spite of the black goggles he was wearing, and, at the same moment, it flashed into my mind that d'Yniol was the name of the traitor who had escaped. Ah, I remembered now!

"I am Captain d'Yniol," he said again, and I saw his fingers closing on my coat sleeves.

It may have been my involuntary movement of recoil—I don't know—but the fellow dropped my coat and sat straight up on the bench.

"I am Captain dY'niol," he said for the third time, "charged with treason and under sentence of death."

"And innocent!" I muttered, before I was even conscious of having spoken. What was it that wrung those involuntary words from my lips, I shall never know, perhaps—but it was I, not he, who trembled, seized with a strange agitation, and it was I, not he, whose hand was stretched forth impulsively, touching his.

Without a tremor he took my hand, pressed it almost imperceptibly, and dropped it. Then I held both letters toward him, and, as he neither looked at them nor at me, I placed them in his hand. Then he started.

"Read them," I said, "they are for you."

"Letters!" he gasped in a voice that sounded like nothing human.

"Yes, they are for you—I know it now—"

"Letters—letters directed to me?"

"Can you not see?" I cried.

Then he raised one frail hand and drew the goggles from his eyes, and, as I looked, I saw two tiny white specks exactly in the center of both pupils.

"Blind!" I faltered.

"I have been unable to read for two years," he said.

After a moment he placed the tip of one finger on the letters.

"They are wet," I said; "shall—would you like to have me read them? For a long time he sat silently in the sunshine, fumbling with his cane, and I watched him without speaking. At last he said, "Read, Monsieur," and I took the letters and broke the seals.

The first letters contained a sheet of paper, damp with discolor, on which a few lines were written.

"My darling, I knew you were innocent—" Here the writing ended, but, in the blur beneath, I read: "Paris shall know—France shall know, for at last I have the proofs and I am coming to find you, my soldier, and to place them in your own dear brave hands. They know, now, at the war ministry—they have a copy of the traitor's confession—but they dare not make it public—they dare not withstand the popular astonishment and rage. Therefore I sail on Monday for Cherbourg by the Green Cross Line, to bring you back to your own again, where you will stand before all the world, without fear, without reproach.

"ALINE."

"This—this is terrible!" I stammered; "can God live and see such things done!"

But with his thin hand he gripped my arm again, bidding me read the other letter; and I shuddered at the menace in his voice.

Then, with his sightless eyes on me, I drew the other letter from the wet, stained envelope. And before I was aware—before I understood the purport of what I saw, I had read aloud these half effased lines:

"The Lorient is sinking—an iceberg—mid-ocean—good-bye—you are innocent—I love——"

"The Lorient!" I cried; "it was the French steamer that was never heard from—the Lorient of the Green Cross Line! I had forgotten—I——"

The loud crash of a revolver stunned me; my ears rang and ached with it as I shrank back from a ragged duty figure that collapsed on the bench beside me, shuddered a moment, and tumbled to the asphalt at my feet.

The trampling of the eager hard-eyed crowd, the dust and taint of powder in the hot air, the harsh alarm of the ambulance clattering up Mail street—these I remember, as I knelt there, helplessly holding the dead hand's hands in mine.

"Soger Charlie," they repeated, "a French dago what shot his-self;" and the words echoed in my ears long after the ambulance rattled away, and the increasing throng dispersed, sullenly, as a couple of policemen cleared a space around the pool of thick blood on the asphalt.

They wanted me as a witness, and I gave my card to one of the policemen who knew me. The rabble transferred its fascinated stare to me, and I turned away and pushed a path between frightened shop girls and ill-smelling loafers, until I lost myself in the human torrent of Broadway.

The torrent took me with it where it flowed— East? West?—I did not notice nor care, but I passed on through the throng, listless, deadly weary of attempting to solve God's justice—striving to understand His purpose—His laws—His judgments which are "true and righteous altogether."

IV

"More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb!"

I turned sharply toward the speaker who shambled at my elbow. His sunken eyes were dull and lustreless, his bloodless face gleamed pallid as a death mask above the blood-red jersey—the emblem of the soldiers of Christ.

I don't know why I stopped, lingering, but, as he passed, I said, "Brother, I also was meditating upon God's wisdom and His testimonies."

The pale fanatic shot a glance at me, hesitated, and fell into my own pace, walking by my side. Under the peak of his Salvation Army cap his eyes shone in the shadow with a strange light.

"Tell me more," I said, sinking my voice below the roar of traffic, the clang! clang! of the cable cars, and the noise of feet on the worn pavements—"tell me of His testimonies."

"Moreover by them is Thy servant warned and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand His errors? Cleanse Thou me from secret faults. Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me. Then shall I be upright and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight—O Lord! My strength and my Redeemer!"

"It is Holy Scripture that you quote," I said; "I also can read that when I choose. But it cannot clear for me the reasons—it cannot make me understand——"

"What?" he asked, and muttered to himself.

"That, for instance," I replied, pointing to a cripple, who had been born deaf and dumb and horribly misshapen by a wretched diseased lump on the sidewalk below St. Paul's churchyard—a sore-eyed thing that mouthed and mowed and rattled pennies in a tin cup as though the sound of copper could stem the human pack that passed hot on the scent of gold.

Then the man who shambled beside me turned and looked long and earnestly into my eyes. And after a moment a dull recollection stirred within me—a vague something that seemed like the awakening memory of a past, long, long forgotten, dim, dark, too subtle, too frail, too indefinite—ah! the old feeling that all men have known—the old strange uneasiness, that useless struggle to remember when and where it all occurred before.

And the man's head sank on his crimson jersey, and he muttered, muttered to himself of God and love and compassion, until I saw that the fierce heat of the city had touched his brain, and I went away and left him prating of mysteries that none but such as he dare name.

So I passed on through dust and heat; and the hot breath of men touched my cheek and eager eyes looked into mine. Eyes, eyes—that met my own and looked through them beyond—far beyond to where gold glittered amid the mirage of eternal hope. Gold! It was in the air where the soft sunlight gilded the floating moats, it was under foot in the dust that the sun made gilt, it glimmered from every window pane where the long red beams struck golden sparks above the gasping gold-hunting hordes of Wall street.

High, high, in the deepening sky the tall buildings towered, and the breeze from the bay lifted the sun-dyed flags of commerce until they waved above the turmoil of the hives below—waved courage and hope and strength to those who lusted after gold.

The sun dipped low behind Castle William as I turned listlessly into the Battery, and the long straight shadows of trees stretched away over greensward and asphalt walk.

Already the electric lights were glimmering among the foliage although the bay shimmered like polished brass and the topsails of the ships glowed with a deeper hue, where the red sun rays fall athwart the rigging.

Old men tottered along the sea wall, tapping the asphalt with worn canes, old women crept to and fro in the coming twilight—old women who carried baskets that gaped for charity or bulged with mouldy stuffs—food, clothing?—I could not tell; I did not care to know.

The heavier thunder from the parapets of Castle William died away over the placid bay, the last red arm of the sun shot up out of the sea, and wavered and faded into the sombre tones of the afterglow. Then came the night, timidly at first, touching sky and water with gray fingers, folding the foliage into soft massed shapes, creeping onward, onward, more swiftly now, until color and form had gone from all the earth and the world was a world of shadows.

And, as I sat there on the dusky sea wall, gradually the bitter thoughts faded and I looked out into the calm night with something of that peace that comes to all when day is ended.

The death at my very elbow of the poor blind wretch in the park had left a shock, but now my nerves relaxed their tension and I began to think about it all—about the letters and the strange woman who had given them to me. I wondered where she had found them—whether they really were carried by some vagrant current in to the shore from the wreck of the fated Lorient.

Nothing but these letters had human eyes encountered from the Lorient, although we believed that fire or berg had been her portion; for there had been no storms when the Lorient steamed away from Cherbourg.

And what of the pale-faced girl in black who had given these letters to me, saying that my own heart would teach me where to place them?

I felt in my pockets for the letters where I had thrust them all crumpled and wet. They were there, and I decided to turn them over to the police. Then I thought of Cusick and the City Hall park, and these set my mind running on Jamison and my own work—ah! I had forgotten that—I had forgotten that I had sworn to stir Jamison's cold, sluggish blood! Trading on his fiancee's reported suicide—or murder! True, he had told me that he was satisfied that the body at the morgue was not Miss Tufft's, because the ring did not correspond with his fiancee's ring. But what sort of a man was that!—to go crawling and nosing about morgues and graves for a full-page illustration which might sell a few extra thousand papers. I had never known he was such a man. It was strange, too—for that was not the sort of illustration that the Weekly used; it was against all precedent—against the whole policy of the paper. He would lose a hundred subscribers where he would gain one by such work.

"The callous brute!" I muttered to myself, "I'll wake him up—I'll—"

I sat straight up on the bench and looked steadily at a figure which was moving toward me under the spluttering electric light.

It was the woman I had met in the park.

She came straight up to me, her pale face gleaming like marble in the dark, her slim hands outstretched.

"I have been looking for you all day—all day," she said, in the same low thrilling tones—"I want the letters back; have you them here?"

"Yes," I said, "I have them here—take then in heaven's name; they have done enough evil for one day!"

She took the letters from my hand; I saw the ring, made of the double serpents, flashing on her slim finger, and I stepped closer, and looked her in the eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I? My name is of no importance to you," she answered.

"You are right," I said, "I do not care to know your name. That ring of yours—"

"What of my ring?" she murmured.

"Nothing—a dead woman lying in the morgue wears such a ring. Do you know what your letters have done? No? Well, I read them to a miserable wretch and he blew his brains out!"

"You read them to a man?"

"I did. He killed himself."

"Who was that man?"

"Captain d'Yniol—"

With something between a sob and a laugh she seized my hand and covered it with kisses, and I, astonished and angry, pulled my hand away from her cold lips and sat down on the bench.

"You needn't thank me," I said, sharply; "if I had known that—but no matter. Perhaps after all the poor devil is better off somewhere in other regions with his sweetheart who was drowned—yes, I imagine he is. He was blind and ill—and broken-hearted."

"Blind?" she asked, gently.

"Yes. Did you know him?"

"I knew him."

"And his sweetheart, Aline?"

"Aline," she repeated softly—"she is dead. I come to thank you in her name."

"For what?—for his death?"

"Ah, yes, for that."

"Where did you get those letters?" I asked her, suddenly.

She did not answer, but stood fingering the wet letters.

Before I could speak again she moved away into the shadows of the trees, lightly, silently, and far down the dark walk I saw her diamond flashing.

Grimly brooding, I rose and passed through the battery to the steps of the elevated road. These I climbed, bought my ticket, and stepped out to the damp platform. When a train came I crowded in with the rest, still pondering on my vengeance, feeling and believing that I was to scourge the conscience of the man who speculated on death.

And at last the train stopped at Twenty-eighth street, and I hurried out and down the steps and away to the morgue.

When I entered the morgue, Skelton, the keeper, was standing before a slab that glistened faintly under the wretched gas jets. He heard my footsteps, and turned around to see who was coming. Then he nodded, saying: "Mr. Hilton, just take a look at this here stiff—I'll be back in a moment—this is the one that all the papers take to be Miss Tufft—but they're all off, because this stiff has been here now for two weeks."

I drew out my sketching block and pencils.

"Which is it, Skelton?" I asked, fumbling for my rubber.

"This one, Mr. Hilton, the girl what's smilin'. Picked up off Sandy Hook, too. Looks as if she was asleep, eh?"

"What's she got in her hand—clenched tight? Oh—a letter. Turn up the gas, Skelton, I want to see her face."

The old man turned the gas jet, and the flame blazed and whistled in the damp, fetid air. Then suddenly my eyes fell on the dead.

Rigid, scarcely breathing, I stared at the ring, made of two twisted serpents set with a great diamond—I saw the wet letters crushed in her slender hand—I looked, and—God help me!—I looked upon the dead face of the girl with whom I had been speaking on the battery!

"Dead for a month at least," said Skelton, calmly.

Then, as I felt my senses leaving me, I screamed out, and at the same instant somebody from behind seized my shoulder and shook me savagely—shook me until I opened my eyes again and gasped and coughed.

"Now then, young feller!" said a park policeman, bending over me, "if you go to sleep on a bench, somebody'll lift your watch!"

I turned, rubbing my eyes desperately.

Then it was all a dream—and no shrinking girl had come to me with damp letters—I had not gone to the office—there was no such person as Miss Tufft—Jamison was not an unfeeling villain—no, indeed!—he treated us all much better than we deserved, and he was kind and generous, too. And the ghastly suicide! Thank God that also was a myth—and the morgue and the battery at night where that pale-faced girl had—ugh!

I felt for my sketch book, found it; turned the pages of all the animals that I had sketched, the hippopotami, the buffalo, the tigers—ah! where was that sketch in which I had made the woman in shabby black the principal figure, with the brooding vultures all around and the crowd in the sunshine?

I hunted everywhere, in every pocket. It was gone.

At last I rose and moved along the narrow asphalt path in the falling twilight.

And as I turned into the broader walk, I was aware of a group, a policeman holding a lantern, some gardeners, and a knot of loungers gathered about something—a dark mass on the ground.

"Found 'em just so," one of the gardeners was saying, "better not touch 'em until the coroner comes."

The policeman shifted his bull's-eye a little; the rays fell on two faces, on two bodies, half supported against a park bench. On the finger of the girl glittered a splendid diamond, set between the fangs of two gold serpents. The man had shot himself; he clasped two wet letters in his hand. The girl's clothing and hair were wringing wet, and her face was the face of a drowned person.

"Well, sir," said the policeman, looking at me; "you seem to know these two people—by your looks—"

"I never saw them before," I gasped, and walked on, trembling in every nerve.

For among the folds of her shabby black dress I had noticed the end of a paper—my sketch that I had missed!

SHE HAD HIM GUESSING.

General Horace Porter tells this story about a gushing young woman and her sweetheart:

"This girl's sweetheart said to her one evening, 'Were you aware that I passed your house last night?' She gave him a glance full of reproach. 'Of course, I was,' she said. 'Do you think I would not know your step?' But he, at this, grew grave and distrait, for he had passed in a cab."